

Speaker 1 ([00:00](#)):

Gardening season has begun or almost begun depending on where you live and if you are looking for a reliable source of seeds. Look no further than true leaf market. I discovered this company last year when I was on the hunt for cover crop seeds and I am beyond impressed with them. They have a huge selection of affordably priced veggies, flowers and micro greens seeds and they have a ton of organic heirloom and non-GMO varieties. Head on over to [theprairiehomestead.com/seeds](http://theprairiehomestead.com/seeds) to have a look around and grab a packet or 12 to complete your seed stash for the year. Welcome to the old fashioned on purpose podcast. The days are getting a little bit longer and even though spring is a long ways away, still the air just feels a tiny bit different outside and that is my cue to get the seeds going in the basement.

New Speaker ([00:58](#)):

Come February or March of each year, I take our little storage room down in the basement and transform it into a full-on grow room and it gives me that first opportunity to plunge my fingers into the soil after a long winter. In today's episode, I'm going to share exactly how I start my own seeds, which helps me to save hundreds of dollars each year. I'm your host Jill Winger, and this is the podcast for the trailblazers, the Mavericks, the homesteaders, the modern pioneers, the makers and the backyard farmers. If you find yourself disenchanted with conformity and like to swim upstream while the rest of society rides the river of least resistance, well you have found your tribe. So back in the day, the early years of our homesteading adventure, I had this, very much pieced together, seed starting set up, rigged in our mudroom. So try to picture this. I think I still have a picture on the blog of it.

Speaker 1 ([02:08](#)):

It was before house remodel and we had these old concrete stairs with kind of a half wall in our mud room right up against a window, a big window, thankfully. So I would take a piece of plywood and I would set it on top of the stair, like the half wall of the stair rail up against the window sill. So it would hold this plywood board up and I would take little lasagna pans that have the plastic covers and I would use that to hopefully start some seeds. And let's just say it was not ideal. It, it worked, and especially when we were on a very tight budget back then, I don't know if I should say it worked. It was a, it was an option. It was the only option I had on our tight budget, but it didn't give me very consistent results.

Speaker 1 ([02:54](#)):

And every year when seed starting time would roll around, it was this sense of, Oh, how am I gonna make this work? They never quite grow right. They're always really spindly. And so I realized pretty quickly that if I was going to commit to starting my own seeds, I had to come up with a system that actually worked and eliminated a lot of the headache. And that's what I'll share with you in this episode. I'm really excited. First off, just a quick reminder why it's worth it to start your own seeds. For me at least, there's two big reasons. Number one, it saves a ton of money. When I go to the nurseries in town, you know, May, usually May, I guess when I'm planting finally, a tomato or a pepper start is three or four bucks. And so if you're going to add, grow any quantity of vegetables and you're buying them all as seedlings at the garden store, you're going to have five or \$600 or more into your garden really, really quickly, which kind of negates the cost benefits of growing your own veggies, right?

Speaker 1 ([04:06](#)):

It's an expensive harvest. So when you start from seed, a packet of seeds is \$3 for sometimes hundreds of seeds and it can save a lot of money come May or June when you're buying plants in the local

nurseries. The other thing I love about it because it is way more variety. So for example, tomatoes, I like growing paste tomatoes. It's very difficult to find paste tomato seedlings locally. I can only find the slicers. So if I, you know, I'm going to grow any quantity of paste tomatoes, I gotta start them myself. So I can go heirloom, I can go organic, I can go all different colors and varieties and types that you're just not going to find at most local garden stores because they have to keep their inventory reasonable, you know? And so they have to keep limited varieties. My favorite things to start down in the basement, tomatoes are obviously a huge one.

Speaker 1 ([05:04](#)):

That's probably the majority of my seedlings are generally tomatoes, but also peppers like poblanos, sweet peppers and the brassica plants, the cabbages, the broccoli, the cauliflower, all of those do really, really well being started in doors and then transplanted. And really for most of us, you have to start them ahead of time. Otherwise it just doesn't work. Like I couldn't plant tomatoes from seed outside and get any sort of harvest whatsoever. And I think that's true for most of you listening to this podcast. Growing seasons just aren't long enough, so you've got to give them a headstart. Yeah, I've had mediocre results with pre-planting squash, onions, like I've done those. I dabble in them. Honestly, squash are better direct seeded. They just don't love being transplanted. Onions, I love the idea of growing them from seed cause you can get any and seed really easily.

Speaker 1 ([06:04](#)):

But when I've done it, I have harvested onions that I planted from seed, but they just were not as robust and it was a lot of headache trying to grow them in flats. They're very, very small. You have to thin them out. For me, it's just easier to buy onion sets, which are the little tiny onion bulbs that come in a bunch. I can get it for like three bucks for a hundred at the garden store. And so maybe not a hundred, maybe more like 50, but they all come in a little bundle. And that's just easier for me because the year that I did somewhat successfully grow my own onions from seed, they still just didn't do great. So anyway. Those were the things that I thought iffy results, but I know for sure tomatoes, peppers, cabbages, broccoli, cauliflower, they do great being started inside with grow lights.

Speaker 1 ([06:51](#)):

Now reminder, you do not have to start all of your seeds ahead of time. There are a good number of vegetables like beans, peas, let us let us as greens, corn, they can be direct seeded. I mean, I can't really think of a place, at least in the United States where they can't be direct seeded once the frost danger has passed. Even with us in Wyoming, which is very short growing season, that's enough time for me to do bean plants from seed and so I kind of divide my seeds into two categories. We have the seeds that need to be started ahead of time and the ones that I saved for Memorial day weekend, when I head outside the plant directly in the soil and I actually have a blog post in case you're like, I don't know how to keep this straight. I have a whole blog post that outlines pretty much all the veggies that you're going to be wanting to plant and when to plant them.

Speaker 1 ([07:45](#)):

If you need to plant them inside or you can direct sow them. And we're going to drop the link to that blog post in the show notes so you can have it all in one place and it's super easy for you to reference. All right, so let's talk about the setup itself. Like I said, it's in a little room in our basement, which I like the room being small with doors that close so I can keep it warm. More on that in a minute. If I was a large, unheated area, let's say a garage or the bigger part of our basement, it would be really tricky to

keep the room warm enough. We wanted to keep this as cost effective and as durable as possible. So I've seen seed set setups laid out like on tables or countertops. We wanted to maximize our space.

Speaker 1 ([08:38](#)):

So we used metal shelving and I have a blog post that we will also link in the show notes that shows pictures in case you're visual, like I am, you want to see the pictures of what this looks like. But we got some really run of the mill metal shelves I think on Amazon. They're probably at your local Costco or your local building store. They might be called a Baker shelf, I don't know. I dunno. But they're, they're just metal. They come in a box, he put them together in a kit. They're very simple and ours has four adjustable shelves I believe. So we could start it off with one of those. And I can fit two flats of seed trays on each shelf for lights. We are using four foot fluorescent shop lights that we got from our local, like Menards, which is a building store like Lowe's or home Depot.

Speaker 1 ([09:33](#)):

I asked Christian to clarify he said either 4 foot fluorescent T eight, whatever that means, lights at Menards, it is a very, very basic. Okay. I like that they come with a little length of chain and we were able to just undo one of the links and hook it over the metal shelving. And then I can adjust them because it's really important when you first start your seedlings, the lights seem to be very, very close to the soil and especially with like your tomatoes. As the tomatoes grow, you raise the lights and this is what prevents those really spindly leggy seedlings. When a seedling has to stretch too far to the light, that's when they get really thin and weak. So we put them down low. As the things grow, we raise them up. It's really, really simple. So that's kind of the extent is a cheap metal shelf with some basic fluorescent lights.

Speaker 1 ([10:27](#)):

The other piece of this, like I mentioned a few minutes ago, is the temperature of the room. So our basement is not, it doesn't like freeze, it's not completely unheated, but we have a wood stove upstairs and we don't keep a fire going or the heater on in the basement generally. So it's warmer than a garage would be in Wyoming during the winter, but it can be cool. And I noticed the first year when I was working on my grow setup, the seeds were not germinating, just would not germinate. And I realized like later it's kind of like duh, they were not warm enough. In order to sprout and germinate, seeds need light and heat, well actually, honestly to germinate, they just need heat. And then once they come out of the soil with their leaves, that's when they need the light. But heat is really important. So once I got a little space heater again, cheap from like Lowe's or home Depot, plug that in and it has a little thermostat.

Speaker 1 ([11:23](#)):

It keeps it at 68 degrees. I think we keep the doors closed and as soon as that first year I got the temperature of the room up, the seeds went bananas. So that's something to keep in mind, light and heat, make sure those are sufficient on both ends of the spectrum. Okay. As far as the trays and the set up I use, I've done a number of things over the years. Like I mentioned back in the day, I used foil lasagna trays like the nine by 13 disposable foil pans with the clear plastic top that snaps on it, that worked for just a handful of seeds. But if you're doing anything in quantity, it just doesn't work so great. So, a couple of years ago I purchased a bunch of the black seed trays and the blog posts that I mentioned earlier has links to these on Amazon. They're pretty inexpensive, but they're like they call them nursery trays or garden trays or something.

Speaker 1 ([12:28](#)):

And then you can get the little packs, the little four packs, just like you would get when you buy a packet of annual flowers at the store. But you can buy those in bulk off of Amazon. And I believe, eight of those fit into one of these trays. And so that's 16 little spots to plant a seed. And so the, the trays keep the water in and I reuse these year after year, I don't throw them away. They actually are pretty durable and it reduces waste. It saves money and it's just simple. Another option I've tried is those are those Jiffy peat pellets. So you may have seen them, they're little disks of their peat or they look like soil. They're very, very flat, but you rehydrate them. So you stick them in a tray, you pour water on them and they expand up to, I dunno, two or three inches tall.

Speaker 1 ([13:23](#)):

And then you plant your seeds right in those and they have a netting that's supposed to decompose. I've found it doesn't decompose wonderfully, so I kind of will tear it off, but the netting decomposes and it's kind of a simple out of the box option for planting your seeds. The problem I have with those, well you have to buy them year after year. They're not expensive, but it is money going out that is eating into your money saving strategies of why you're growing seeds in the first place. But peat is not a sustainable material. So the way that peat is harvested isn't great and I kind of don't love using a lot of peat. If I can avoid it. So there's also similar pellets made out of coconut coir, C O I R which is basically ground up coconut husks. And that's another option.

Speaker 1 ([14:18](#)):

It's kind of a waste product from coconuts, which is a little more sustainable. Those are on Amazon as well. Check those out. They work just as well. But honestly what I've done, I think last year I just used potting soil. I use my trays, I put potting soil directly in the little packs and planted those seeds right in there. It's very simple. You know, I just grab whatever potting soil is on sale in town, and call it good and I don't have to keep ordering the peat pellets. It also sees me from at least one transplant process. I usually have to transplant at least one other time into bigger pots or bigger cups. But the, the issue with the little peat pellets or the coconut quar pellets is they are just this growing medium. They don't contain any sort of food or fertilizer for the little baby seedlings.

Speaker 1 ([15:16](#)):

And so you need to, once the seeds come up and they have their first two leaves or so roughly you need to transplant the little peat pellets into a pack with potting soil. And I find that if I plant directly in the potting soil, I just don't have to transplant twice. I generally just have to transplant once and just to, it's a step. Another question that I know comes up is if you have to use seed starting medium when you start seeds indoors or if you need, if you can just use potting soil. And honestly I just use potting soil. I don't use soil directly from my garden because it just doesn't work as well. And there can be diseases or things in the soil that are, that would potentially affect how the seedlings germinate. But I just grab a bag of potting soil and it works just fine.

Speaker 1 ([16:06](#)):

You don't have to go for the seed starting mix unless you want to. All right. So, we've talked about the materials of the shelf. We've talked about what I actually put the seedlings in. Let's talk about process now. How this actually goes down. It's very, very easy. Okay? First things first is you have to either damp in the potting soil that you're using, you know, put it in your trays, put it in your packs or your cups or whatever you're going to start the seeds in and get it wet. And let it kind of soak for a minute. If you try

to plant in completely dry potting soil, it just doesn't work. And when you first put the water in, the seeds will float to the top and it's kind of a mess. So get it wet first. And then if you're using the pellets, of course you need to hydrate those, which they'll pop up and get way taller.

Speaker 1 ([16:53](#)):

And once you've done that, just check the back of your seed packets and you're gonna, I say, roughly, I don't use a ruler or measure it, but see how much they recommend or what depth they recommend for you to put the seeds in. Some of them are a little bit deeper than others. Some herb seeds or things like that are going to be surface sown. So there's very little soil on top. So I just use my finger. I stick it in there. I do not measure or get super hung up on it. Most of the time it all works out. If I'm using older seeds, I may put two seeds into a little pack or into a peat pellet. Just in case one doesn't germinate, but most of the time they do. They do pretty well. Then once the seeds are in, make sure the soil is covering them sufficiently.

Speaker 1 ([17:39](#)):

I'll give them another little splash of water. You don't want to drown them at this point. Just enough to keep things damp. And here's the important part. Don't forget to label either your trays or your individual little seed packs or cups or whatever you're using. I cannot tell you how many times I was positive. I would remember what I planted. The variety, if you're trying to keep track of which tomatoes are what, or even just the vegetable itself and it will leave your brain within about an hour of planting, I promise you. So you can use Popsicle sticks. You can use those little plastic garden labeled taggy things that are available on Amazon. Whatever you want to do, just label it because you will forget, okay, once I have everything in a tray or whatever I'm planting in, I take it downstairs and I will make sure the heaters on and I put my lights down very low.

Speaker 1 ([18:35](#)):

So they're almost touching the trays. Make sure that nothing's going to catch on fire and you just leave it and you're going to, at this point, the most important thing is to make sure you water it every day or at least check it. We don't want to drown them and you can't actually over-water and if your soil is very wet or very soggy, that's not great for the seedlings, but it's also not great for them to dry out. And I would say when you have trouble starting seeds, it's generally, or at least often at the beginning, it's because the seeds have not been consistently moist. Because once a seed that is in the process of germinating, dries out, it's all over, right? There's no coming back. You can sometimes salvage a seedling that gets a little wilted, but those germinating seeds need to be consistently damp for their entire period.

Speaker 1 ([19:31](#)):

So water every day, check them every day. Once you kind of get in a routine, you'll know how fast things dry out. So you might be able to switch to every other day. But the watering is the most important part and that's really the extent of it. So from March till May I have it on my calendar, check the seeds, water the seeds when like, let's use tomato for example, when they start to get a couple inches tall in my little packs, then I'm considering, I usually end up transplanting them and I use very classy red solo cups. Yes. And I actually reuse them. I had someone yell at me online once that I was using plastic that was disposable. And, and yes, it is disposable plastic, but I use them year after year. And so I get a lot of bang for my buck out of one package of red solo cups.

Speaker 1 ([20:24](#)):

But I found those are perfect for tomatoes. So I'll transplant those into those cups. We're going to go into the whole process of transplanting and hardening off in a future episode cause it's a lot of information for today. But at this point, basically in the process, it's all about just watering and checking and it's that simple. You can do this. I promise you this is not complicated. It's to save you a ton of money in your gardening budget this year. And even if you don't have the shelves or the lights and you're investing in those for the first time, the cool thing about this is that it pays for itself quickly. So I would love for you to share with me either a picture of your current seed setup or once you get it going, take a shot posted on Instagram or Facebook, tag me.

Speaker 1 ([21:12](#)):

I love seeing other people's setups. Maybe you have a greenhouse, maybe you are in a basement like I am, but I'd love to get inspired by what you're doing. So send it my way. So if you are ready to do this homesteading thing, but you're not quite sure where to start or how to get this garden going or what vegetables you should grow. I have an entire library of resources I put together for homesteaders just like you, and you can get complimentary access to this library over at [theprairiehomestead.com/grow](http://theprairiehomestead.com/grow) and that is it for this episode, my friend. If you found it helpful, don't forget to hit subscribe so you can get new episodes automatically delivered to your phone or your device. And thanks for listening. We'll chat more on the next episode of the old fashioned on purpose podcast.